

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

December 8, 2005

LAGUNA DE SANTA ROSA RESTORATION

File No. 05-081

Project Manager: Maxene Spellman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation (“the Foundation”) to restore two miles of riparian corridor and 10 acres of upland oak savannah, and to prepare site specific engineering plans and environmental documentation for the restoration of five acres of seasonal wetlands, all located within the Laguna de Santa Rosa in Sonoma County.

LOCATION: The proposed project encompasses acreage surrounding the main channel of the Laguna de Santa Rosa located in western Sonoma County south of the Russian River. (Exhibit 1) Riparian habitat restoration will take place along the main channel in unincorporated Sonoma County and the City of Sebastopol, oak savannah restoration will be undertaken in the City of Santa Rosa, and site specific engineering plans for seasonal wetland restoration will encompass an upland area east of the main channel in unincorporated Sonoma County. (Exhibit 2).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Regional Location Map

Exhibit 2: Site Map of Proposed Project in the Laguna de Santa Rosa

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

Exhibit 4: *Bay Nature* article, “New Life for the Laguna”

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160 through 31164 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation (“the Foundation”) for riparian habitat and oak savannah restoration and for the preparation of engineering designs and environmental documentation for seasonal wetland restoration in the Laguna de Santa Rosa, subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of Conservancy funds, the Foundation shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the

Conservancy a detailed work program, schedule, and budget and the names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the project .”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Stretching 14 miles south of the Russian River, the Laguna de Santa Rosa (the Laguna) is the largest tributary to the Russian River and the second largest freshwater wetland in coastal Northern California. The Laguna’s wetlands and surrounding upland areas are home to a wide variety of wildlife and provide an important stopover for thousands of birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway. The Resource Conservation Element of the Sonoma County General Plan designates the area encompassing the main channel and adjacent uplands as the Laguna de Santa Rosa Resource Conservation Program Boundary in recognition of the Laguna’s sensitive habitats and to encourage wildlife management.

The main channel ranges in size from a narrow creek to an expansive slow-moving lake. Endangered coho salmon and steelhead trout inhabit the Laguna, and its main channel is surrounded by a biologically diverse expanse of oak woodland, annual grassland and seasonal wetlands, which are home to a variety of state and federally listed plant and animal species. The Foundation proposes to restore habitat for these species while not impacting their existing habitat through hand removal of invasive plant species without the use of herbicides, and replanting with native plants. Specifically, the Foundation seeks to restore the central reach of the Laguna’s main channel between its two best-preserved areas of riparian forest because, despite remaining habitat values, the Laguna suffers from significant habitat fragmentation, water quality degradation, bank erosion, and the spread of invasive species.

The proposed project will include the following elements:

1. Restore 1.8 miles of riparian habitat at the southern end of the 5-mile central reach. Riparian habitat restoration activities include hand removal of 6 acres of invasive pepperweed and 1/2 acre of Himalayan blackberry, and replanting of riparian vegetation on 26 acres of channel frontage,
2. Restore 1,500 linear feet of riparian habitat at the northern end of the 5-mile central reach. Activities include hand removal of invasive pepperweed and planting of native plants on the

east side, and working with willing landowners on the west side to install approximately ¼-mile of exclusion fencing needed to prevent livestock from walking into the channel.

3. Restore 10 acres of oak savannah woodland located upland from the larger of the two segments of the channel targeted for restoration. (See Exhibit 2, Site Map of the Proposed Project in the Laguna de Santa Rosa) Restoration of the upland 10 acres will include stabilization of slopes that steeply decline towards the channel, and planting of oaks and associated vegetation on the historical oak savannah habitat complex of the Santa Rosa Plain. Its restoration would benefit cormorants and egrets residing in a nearby rookery, provide important upland habitat to other birds and mammals of the Laguna, stabilize slopes, and begin to establish the important connection between upland and riparian habitats.
4. Prepare engineering design plans and environmental documentation for the restoration of approximately 5 acres of degraded seasonal wetlands. The seasonal wetlands, located between the oak savannah woodland and the larger riparian habitat area proposed for restoration, consist of vernal swales inhabited by endangered plant species. The Foundation will produce these plans with the goal of re-creating hydrological interconnectedness among the wetland swales for disbursement of nutrients, seeds, and aquatic invertebrates. Plans will also include measures to collect and plant seeds of the endangered plants to optimize their distribution throughout the restored seasonal wetlands.

When the project is completed, the Foundation will have achieved the following:

- Restoration of 1.8 continuous miles of riparian habitat along the south end of the central reach of the main channel of the Laguna,
- Restoration and protection from livestock intrusion of an additional 1,500 linear feet of riparian habitat, also along the central reach of the main channel,
- Restoration of 10 acres of a historic oak savannah habitat complex, stabilization of its eroding slopes, and revitalization of the wildlife and hydrologic connection between it and the channel, and
- Completion of engineering design plans and environmental documentation needed to implement restoration of 5 acres of seasonal wetlands in anticipation of completing the continuous linkage of riparian habitat to seasonal wetland to upland habitat.

In the future the Foundation intends to implement these seasonal wetlands design plans, and complete riparian restoration of the remainder of the 5-mile central reach of the main channel.

The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to long-term stewardship of the Laguna. The Foundation's LagunaKeepers program recruits and deploys 150 enthusiastic volunteers, plus AmeriCorps volunteers, who perform monthly workdays in the Laguna to plant trees, weed, and pick up trash. The Foundation's LagunaKeepers have planted thousands of trees, and with assistance from the Conservancy, successfully restored an 8-acre Laguna upland parcel by planting native oaks and shrubs. Another Foundation project resulted in a re-direction of a waterway to reflect historic contours. The Foundation has also coordinated an important project to remove the invasive water primrose *Ludwigia*. The Foundation has implemented a multi-year project involving several cities, the County of Sonoma, as well as various agencies, to agree on a control strategy. Under the Foundation's leadership and the partnerships they've

formed, implementation of treatment has begun on 150 acres of Laguna channels and floodplain for the removal of this harmful invasive plant.

Site Description:

- 1.8 Miles of Channel Frontage at the Southern End of the Central Reach (Riparian Habitat Restoration) – This area abuts the Laguna channel on its eastern side, where a relatively narrow strip of riparian vegetation gives way to grasslands (former agricultural fields). The southern portion of this strip is on the City of Sebastopol parkland property. Amongst mostly non-native vegetation, several valley oaks and patches of native sedges are found within and adjacent to the restoration area. North of the Sebastopol parkland, on the Balletto property, the riparian strip is quite dense containing few native species. A remnant oxbow channel is also located next to the restoration area on the Balletto property bordered by several old fences that will be taken out. Both the City and Balletto properties contain numerous patches of perennial pepperweed, and several large clumps of Himalayan blackberry that will be removed.
- 1,500 Linear Feet of Channel Frontage at the Northern End of the Central Reach (Riparian Habitat Restoration and Exclusion Fencing) – The County-owned property on the east side of the channel consists of flat topography with large stands of native sedges. However, invasive perennial pepperweed also grows near the waterway. Restoration will involve its removal and the replanting of native plant species. Grassland and a stand of oak and ash trees extend over the remainder of the County parcel. On the opposite side of the channel is a privately owned dairy operation. The Foundation is negotiating with the landowner for permission to install approximately ¼ mile of exclusion fencing to protect the channel from livestock intrusion.
- 10 Acres of Upland (Oak Savannah Restoration) – This area is located 500 feet upslope in an easterly direction from the main channel and is owned by the City of Santa Rosa. At one time complexes of open oak savannah covered large segments of the Santa Rosa Plain of which this site was part. The intact woodlands that remain elsewhere in the Laguna are one of its signature features providing key habitat. However, past agricultural use and irrigation of the proposed site severely damaged the oak savannah habitat, eliminated nearly all the trees, and caused severe erosion of the slopes leading down to the seasonal wetlands below.
- 5 Acres of Seasonal Wetland (Site Design Planning) – Labeled “Lower Balletto field” on the site map, this low-lying floodplain with vernal swales rests between the main channel and upland areas targeted for restoration. Past agricultural operations for growing vegetables have resulted in sedimentation of the vernal swales, another key feature of sensitive Laguna habitats. A population of the endangered plant, Sebastopol meadowfoam, usually associated with vernal pools and swales, has survived in spite of these past activities. Currently, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District holds a Conservation Easement (“forever wild” easement) over this site.

Project History: In the early 1990s the Foundation initiated a planning process that culminated in the preparation of a Coordinated Resource Management Plan (CRMP) for the Laguna de Santa Rosa. The CRMP, completed in 1995 by a task force of private organizations and public agencies, listed general objectives and produced a geographic focus to the 21,000-acre Core Planning Area. Since the inception of the Bay Area Conservancy Program, the Conservancy has

provided assistance for planning, trail construction, and habitat restoration consistent with the CRMP as follows:

In 2000 the Conservancy provided a grant to the Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) to prepare a Protection Plan for the Core Planning Area. The Protection Plan, completed in May 2003, addresses multiple site-specific resource issues and targets priority properties for acquisition. The Laguna de Santa Rosa Working Group met regularly to develop strategies for addressing the resource issues identified in the Protection Plan. The Working Group agreed that one of the next steps in the preservation and protection of the Laguna was to prepare the Resource Management Plan (RMP) to apply best management practices and devise strategies for restoration of sensitive resources.

In December 2003, the Conservancy provided a grant to the Foundation to prepare a Resource Management Plan (RMP). The RMP is on schedule for completion in early 2006. Draft strategies set forth in the RMP are for extensive riparian and wetland restoration, and bank stabilization of the Laguna channel such as is proposed in this recommendation. In December 2003, under the same authorization, the Conservancy also provided a grant to the Sonoma County Water Agency to collaborate with the United States Army Corps of Engineers to complete its preparation of a study of the sedimentation in the Laguna and to evaluate potential restoration and flood control projects. Although the Corps' evaluation of potential projects is delayed due to Congressional budgetary constraints, its sedimentation study emphasizes the importance of initiating projects to reduce bank erosion. Through the measures designed to restore the channel's riparian habitat, the Foundation's proposed project will begin to implement both the draft RMP and recommendations of the Corps' study.

In January 2001 the Conservancy also provided a grant to the City of Sebastopol to construct a loop trail, remove exotic plants and restore oak woodland habitat within the trail corridor. This trail was completed in 2002. The City continues to provide stewardship and management of the trail and the native plantings. The City's project is located upland from a section of the proposed restoration of riparian habitat in the central reach of the main channel. The Foundation's proposed project is located near the City's enhancement of the upland oak woodland and will serve to further enhance the important wildlife connection of river to upland habitats.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 200,000
Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation	<u>240,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$440,000

The Conservancy's contribution of \$200,000 is expected to come from its FY 02/03 appropriation from the "California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002" (Proposition 40) for the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. This funding source may be used for the deployment and development (including rehabilitation, restoration, and enhancement) of land and water resources in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 5096.650(b)). The proposed project serves to restore land and water resources of the Laguna de Santa Rosa and assist in the development of a site-specific design to restore Laguna

seasonal wetlands. In addition, as discussed below, the project is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21.

Proposition 40 also requires the Conservancy to give priority to grant projects with matching funds (§5096.651). The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation will match Conservancy funding for program planning on a greater than one to one ratio, and is committed to implementing the project with the assistance of ongoing volunteer support from the “LagunaKeepers” and recruited support from AmeriCorp volunteers. The Foundation is requesting grants to match the Conservancy funds from the Community Foundation of Sonoma County and the City of Santa Rosa Environmental Enhancement Grants Program, both of which have expressed interest. In addition the Foundation expects to receive \$100,000 of private wetland mitigation funds to apply to this project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would advance the purposes of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31160-31164). The project is consistent with §31162, which authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects and award grants in the nine-county Bay Area to public and private agencies and organizations to help achieve the following goals: “protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance and . . . promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational or educational purposes”. The restoration of riparian and upland habitats and the preparation of design plans for seasonal wetland enhancement, which are funded by the proposed project, will further these goals with respect to improving the habitat quality of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, a natural and open space resource of great significance to the Bay Area region.

The proposed project is also consistent with §31163(a), which requires the Conservancy to “cooperate with . . . nonprofit land trusts, . . . and other interested parties in identifying and adopting long-term resource . . . goals for the San Francisco Bay area.” This project responds to a collaborative process that defined long-term restoration management goals regarding the enhancement of the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

Finally, this project is appropriate for San Francisco Bay Conservancy Program priority under the criteria of §31163(c), because it is supported by the adopted County regulations concerning control of invasive species, serves a regional constituency, can be implemented in a timely way, provides opportunities for resource restoration that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented, and includes matching funds from other sources of funding.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

San Francisco Bay Program Goal Matrix under Uplands identifies Laguna de Santa Rosa as an area of significance. The proposed project addresses restoration of wildlife habitats within a 5-mile stretch of river corridor associated with the 21,000 acres of the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will restore 2 miles of riparian habitat and 10 acres of oak savannah upland habitat in the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective B** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project is to develop a site-specific restoration design for approximately 5 acres of seasonal wetlands in the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The restoration of the Laguna de Santa Rosa enjoys wide support from federal, state and local legislators and agencies, community groups and private citizens. Specifically, the proposed project is supported by the Congress member Lynn Woolsey, Senator Wesley Chesbro, Assembly member Patty Berg, Assembly member Noreen Evans, the California Department of Fish and Game, the Sonoma County Water Agency, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, the City of Sebastopol, the City of Santa Rosa, the California Native Plant Society, the Madrone Chapter of the Audubon Society, and the individuals and volunteers that make up the membership of the LagunaKeepers. Letters of support are attached as Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The Laguna de Santa Rosa is located within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. See the "Site Description" section above.
5. **Need:** The Foundation is not able to implement restoration activities or prepare engineering drawings for seasonal wetland enhancement without the Conservancy's assistance. This project is needed to prevent the permanent degradation of the riparian habitat and water quality of the middle reach of the Laguna's main channel, and to provide badly needed additional upland transition habitat for bird and mammal species associated with the middle reach of the Laguna.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Laguna de Santa Rosa is the largest tributary of the Russian River and is among the most biologically diverse regions in northwestern California. The proposed project along the central reach of the main channel is the first phase to restore the ecological health of this important wetland area.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The restoration will immediately protect sensitive natural resources in the middle reach of the Laguna from further degradation. If not implemented soon, wildlife habitat in the Laguna will remain fragmented, sedimentation of the main channel will continue to increase, and water quality will continue to deteriorate. Perennial pepperweed, an invasive wetland plant, is just beginning to take hold in the project area, and a rapid, concerted effort is needed to control this aggressive species. The Foundation has led the recent multi-jurisdictional effort to the large-scale removal of a problem infestation of *Ludwigia*, an invasive aquatic weed spreading throughout the Laguna. Early implementation of the proposed project will also assist in the long-term resistance to further invasion of *Ludwigia*.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will address several issues, including the restoration of riparian habitat and upland transition zones to assist in the recovery of state and federally listed species, control of invasive species, the improvement of water quality by addressing sedimentation problems, the increased flood protection capabilities through improving channel flow, and the funding of planning needed to implement restoration of sensitive seasonal wetlands of the Laguna.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
10. **Readiness:** The Foundation is ready to begin the proposed restoration work and to develop design plans immediately.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
12. **Return to Conservancy:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
13. **Cooperation:** The landowners are supportive of the project. These include the City of Santa Rosa and the City of Sebastopol. The Sonoma Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District is also supportive. The District holds a “Forever Wild Easement” on a portion of the property proposed for riparian restoration. Balletto Farm, the underlying owner of land on which the easement is located, also strongly supports this project. The California Department of Fish and Game will cooperate to provide guidance and advice for the proposed preparation of engineering design plans for the seasonal wetlands.

CONSISTENCY WITH APPROVED LOCAL PLANS AND REGULATIONS:

The proposed project is consistent with the following approved local and regional plans:

- *Sonoma County General Plan* (1989) Land Use Element, Objective LU-9c calls for development of programs for preservation and enhancement of important biotic resource areas with emphasis on lands in the Laguna de Santa Rosa.
- *Sonoma County General Plan* (1989) Resource Conservation Element, Objective RC-5d designates the section of the Laguna de Santa Rosa covered by the proposed project sites as within the boundary of the “Laguna de Santa Rosa Resource Conservation Program” calling for its preservation and restoration.

- *Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District's Acquisition Plan, 2000* Natural Resources Element and Biodiversity Element give priority to preservation and restoration of oak woodlands and of sites with high amounts of natural resources, listing the Laguna de Santa Rosa and the Santa Rosa Plain among such areas.
- *Laguna de Santa Rosa Coordination Resource Management Plan* (1995) ratified by the Sonoma County Water Agency, the City of Santa Rosa, and the City of Sebastopol, identifies as significant issues of concern riparian habitat and vernal pool fragmentation, water quality degradation, exotic pest species, and impaired floodplain function.
- *Laguna de Santa Rosa Park Master Plan* (1993) Policy B.1.1 recommends re-vegetation and enhancement of riparian habitat in the central reach of the main channel, and on page 25 recommends seeking voluntary landowner cooperation for publicly financed fencing along the Laguna channel to eliminate grazing impacts and allow for the re-establishment of riparian trees.
- *Pacific Coast Joint Venture Strategic Plan* (1993) recommends enhancement of seasonal and permanent wetlands and restoration of riparian zones in the Laguna de Santa Rosa.
- *Kelly Farm Ranch Plan, City of Santa Rosa* (2000), applicable to the 10-acre area targeted for oak woodland restoration, proposes this area for special management for valley oak woodland restoration.
- *County of Sonoma's Quarantine Regulations* give a high rating for eradication of invasive plants such as are impacting the central reach of the main channel of the Laguna.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The restoration of riparian habitat and oak savannah upland habitat is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15304 in it involves minor alterations in land, water, and vegetation on existing wildlife management areas which result in improvement of habitat for fish and wildlife resources. The sites proposed for restoration are within the boundary of the "Laguna de Santa Rosa Resource Conservation Program" as identified in the Resource Conservation Element of the Sonoma County General Plan. Through this official designation, the County General Plan calls for preservation and restoration of the Laguna's sensitive habitats for the benefit of fish and wildlife.

The preparation of design engineering plans for the restoration of seasonal wetlands is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262 in that it involves only planning for possible future actions which have not been approved, adopted, or funded. As also required by Section 15262, this aspect of the project will directly consider environmental factors associated with the planning of the design, through the preparation of environmental documentation needed for the seasonal wetlands restoration.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.